

How freelance journalists can battle mis- and disinformation in news

False and misleading information has a major impact on society and democracies as it feeds polarisation, fear, racism and violence. From the production of entirely fake news stories to the design of more elaborate disinformation tactics, adversarial groups are constantly looking for new ways to misguide and manipulate facts and narratives to influence journalists and public opinion.

As a freelance journalist, you will often work independently or outside of a newsroom. **Sharpening your fact-checking and verification skills is vital** to protect both you and your stories from mis- and disinformation. Knowing the networks and resources you can turn to for help means you're not alone in this important fight.

The challenge: The mis/disinformation phenomenon is affecting trust in media



62%

In a 2020 global study, **62%** of respondents felt that there was a fair extent of fake news on online websites and platforms. **52%** said the same about the news shown on TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2020, **more than half** of the global sample said they were concerned about what is true or false on the internet when it comes to news. Domestic politicians are the single most frequently named source of misinformation.

38%
-4% since 2019

Less than four in 10 (38%) said they trust most news most of the time – a fall of four percentage points from 2019; less than half (46%) said they trust the news they use themselves.

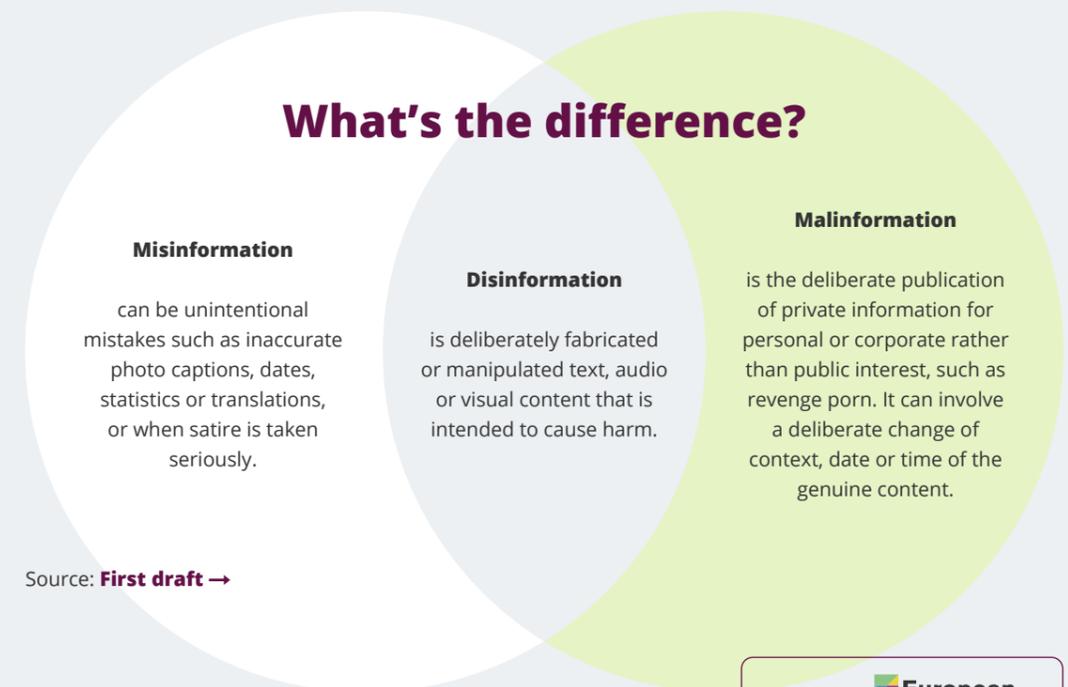
Freelance journalists rely on building relationships with editors and publications. If we aren't careful and our work perpetuates mis- or disinformation, these relationships can crumble and could make it harder for the next freelancer who pitches to that title.

Source: [Statista](#) → [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#) →

Know the types and intention of mis- and disinformation

High harm		Fabricated content	New content is 100% false, designed to deceive and harm
		Manipulated content	When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive
		Imposter content	When genuine sources are impersonate
		False connection	When headlines, visual or captions don't support the content
Low harm		Satire or parody	No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool
		False context	When genuine content is shared with false contextual information
		Misleading content	Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual

Source: [First draft](#) →



Source: [First draft](#) →



The fundamentals of verification

1



Think like an adversary

When you look at digital content and messages, always consider the motivations behind its creation and propagation. Put yourself in the shoes of someone who is looking to manipulate information.

2



Focus on actors, content, behaviour and networks

Compare and contrast these four things to understand what you're seeing. Start with one piece of content – a post or website – and identify how it links with larger networks through behaviour and other connections.

3



Monitor and collect

Monitoring and tracking known actors, topics and communities of interest is essential. Keep and organise what you need, whether in spreadsheets, screenshot folders or by using paid tools.

4



Be careful with attribution

Sometimes it's impossible to say exactly who's behind a particular account, piece of content or a larger information operation. Have this in mind before making any attributions for the content you're analysing.

What every freelancer needs to know

Organise your information



When conducting verification work or a digital investigation keep your research **organised** and archive everything. Take screenshots or save pages as PDFs – accounts and posts can disappear, links can go dead and webpages can be edited. Your editor may want to see this evidence down the line too.

Spend time collecting information and then go back and filter it. What have you been able to confirm in multiple ways? What further leads have emerged? This takes time so plan for this and keep editors in the loop.

You are likely to end up with vast quantities of evidence when conducting digital investigations. Following a **structured process** allows you to reduce inefficiencies and enables other remote investigators to work alongside you with everyone staying on the same page, says Bertram Hill, a freelance open-source intelligence journalist who works with BBC Africa Eye: "That way, if there is misinformation or disinformation about an event we are investigating and what really happened, we have the evidence base to challenge it."

Expert tip

Freelance journalist and digital investigator Jordan Wildon has a "virtual computer" set up for each investigation he's working on to add extra security as well as to organise his research. He has used the [intelligence cycle](#) as a model.

"Ensure that everything is kept organised in some way that makes sense to you," says Wildon, whether that's separate desktop folders or something more sophisticated. Putting dates and sometimes times in filename, as well as a brief description of what they are, can help save time.

Be thorough before you filter: "You can always cut down your notes, but you can never go back and find that one website which contained a crucial lead but you dismissed it at the time because it seemed unrelated."

A shared Google Doc when working with others or a newsroom can help you keep track of verification efforts in real-time, says Kerry Alexandra, a freelance reporter and producer.

Protect yourself online

Much of this verification work will be conducted online. It may require you to maintain a social media presence and sometimes draw attention to your interest in a piece of user-generated content or another online account.

"When it comes to disinformation, the actors who peddle it could become hostile to any investigators they find working to uncover it," says Hill. "One of the simplest ways to disrupt your reporting is to attack you digitally, especially if you are a lone freelancer without the security assistance of a larger organisation behind you."

Take precautions to protect yourself online, from two-factor authentication on your accounts, authenticator apps and strong passwords; to not sharing information about yourself that you wouldn't be comfortable with family, friends, editors and readers knowing. Encrypt hard drives with sensitive files. Certain topics and investigations could put you at greater risk, for example, investigating extremist groups online.



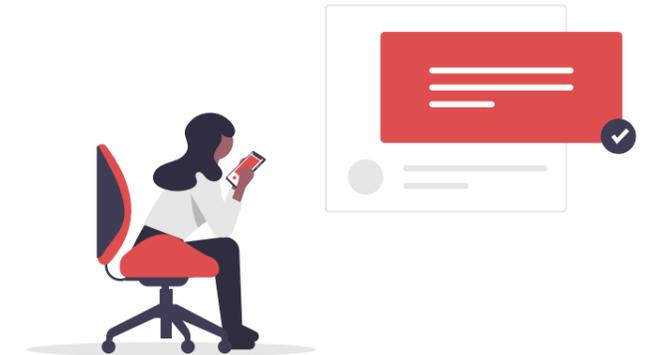
Expert tip

A good rule of thumb is to remember two things, says freelancer Wildon: "Anything you post online is categorically there forever and assume anything put into group chats can be leaked or compromised and read." [This guide to removing personal information about yourself online can be useful and there are ways to improve your security online too.](#)

Learning about open-source intelligence and developing your investigation skills helps you understand where your own privacy/security blindspots are, he adds, as well as what things people you're investigating might have forgotten to remove: "The times you post online can say a lot about when you sleep (or don't), a photo of the sunrise out your bedroom window can reveal your address, and I've used both to find people I'm investigating."

If you are trying to connect with a source on social media, make the first exchange on the platform and then move the conversation to email or a closed messaging app, adds Raina, a journalist whose recent work has focused on analysing misinformation and disinformation on social media and closed messaging apps in India.

Study misinformation trends



On a given reporting topic, reflect on and research where misinformation and disinformation can commonly occur. [Misinformation can creep into immigration and migration topics, for example](#), through a lack of data literacy in journalists and readers, politicians using it as a way to attack or promote policy and confusion about the differences between terms such as "migrant", "asylum seeker" and "refugee".

Understanding **misinformation trends** specific to your reporting area can help you be extra vigilant in your reporting, establish what sources are likely to be reliable and prompt important verification questions. It can also help you understand the questions or misunderstandings that a given audience might have about the topic.

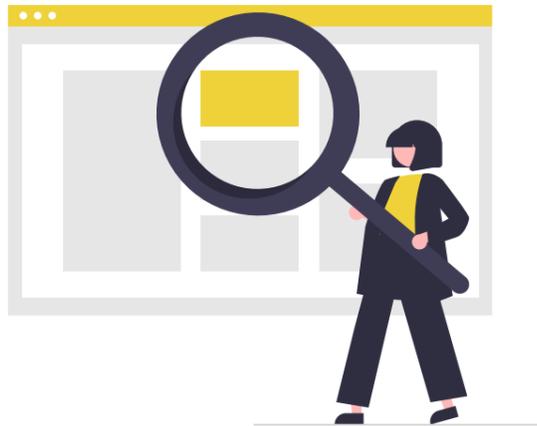
Expert tip

The scale of misinformation is huge, so be mindful of what you can address as a freelancer, says Pamposh Raina. Verification work can be labour intensive and time-consuming and as a freelancer, you'll need to balance this time spent against your other work and pay. If you are working independently, have a clear goal, know how you will publish and distribute your work, and who your intended audience is, she says.





Verify where you pitch



Don't become an unwitting conduit for misinformation or for disinformation actors. Organisations who use the word news in their title aren't always news outlets, for example.

When you encounter a news site that you've not heard of before, do your research. Use the same verification and trust criteria you will apply to your online content and sources to assess its credibility.

Keep your skills up-to-date

Having the time and resources to keep your verification and digital investigation skills up-to-date can be challenging as a freelancer, but doing so will not only improve your work but could help you pitch yourself to editors or newsrooms.

Many newsrooms are developing their own, in-house skills in this area, but developing a specialism within misinformation or disinformation, whether that's a topic or being able to use a specific tool well, could lead to paid work.

Expert tip

"Advertise your skills and strengths in this area," says Raina. "Maybe monitoring social media or messaging apps is something that you're good at or you are very methodical and can help newsrooms work on that."

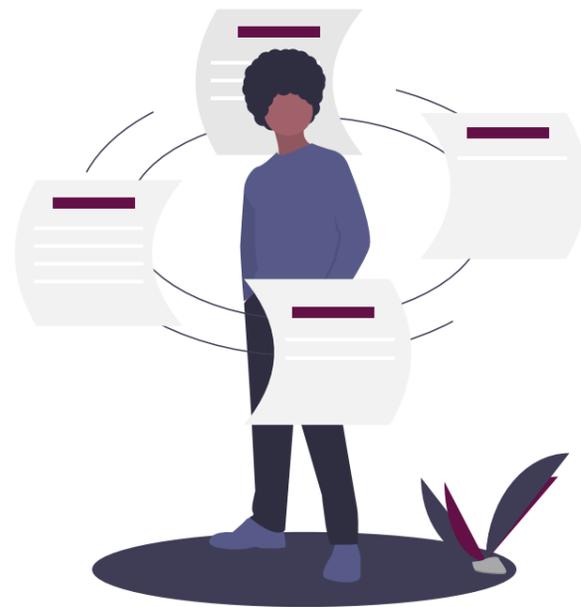
If you are working with a newsroom on shifts or verification projects, ask people you're working with what their tools and processes are or how they verified a particular story. It helps you stay up-to-date and learn new approaches, says Alexandra.

Know the legal risks

As a freelance journalist, you may not have the same access to a newsroom's legal resources or editorial support as a staff journalist. If you can't verify something or still have questions about the credibility of sources who created or posted the content in question, publication of the story could damage your reputation and make you especially vulnerable to legal action. You don't want to find yourself in that situation.

If you have ethical or legal concerns, don't be afraid to work closely with your editor and ask lots of questions, especially if your work involves subjects or sources crossing jurisdictions in different countries.

Don't jump the gun by reporting or sharing something on social media that you can't yet fully confirm or that leaks sensitive information. As freelancers, we often want to show our work in progress and have to promote ourselves but ensure you don't put yourself at risk from legal action or compromise sources. Here's how Wildon protected the identity of a source while showing his process in a Twitter thread of confirmed findings.

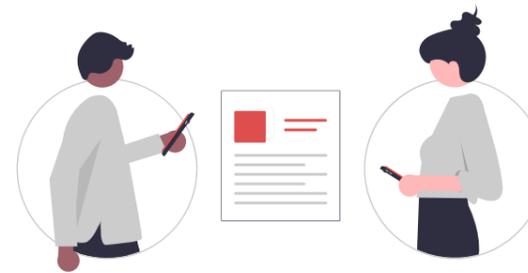


Expert tip

If working entirely independently, are there other journalists you could involve in the story or to check your findings? "Our intuition can be great guidance, but if something feels off, it's time to explore why," says Wildon. Check the law around it, assess why you're uncomfortable, and if something feels ethically 'off' then talk it through with an editor or someone close to you.

If you need to use someone's content as part of your story, don't forget to seek permission – this is crucial for copyright reasons. Build a simple permission form that can be shared via a link and keep it handy so it speeds up the process, says Raina

Collaborate



Check what fact-checking and verification has been conducted on a story, source or piece of content already. Seek out networks of fact-checkers specific to your topic or the region where you are reporting and consider collaborating. This can give you extra resources and protection as a freelance journalist, as well as providing useful sense-checking and skill-sharing opportunities.

It's important to find time to network with others who work in this space, says Raina. It allows you to bounce ideas around or connect with contacts, skills or funding that could get investigative projects up and running.

Expert tip

"I used to be a lot more open source but over time I've started keeping things within a very closed group of people to ensure that I keep details about sensitive investigations safe," says Wildon, who might fact-check things with publishers or turn to groups of various experts he is connected to for confirmation of something before publication.

Online communities can provide valuable on-the-ground, regional or subject-specific insights helpful to the verification process, adds Alexandra. Seek out and become an active member of online networks that complement your skills.

Protect your mental health

Depending on the subject matter, verification work can expose journalists to graphic imagery, distressing accounts, bad actors or trolling. You need to assess what you might expose yourself to and draw your boundaries, because the only support resource you have in this area as a freelancer might be yourself, says Raina: "It's very important to step back and say, I'll come back to it later."

Expert tip

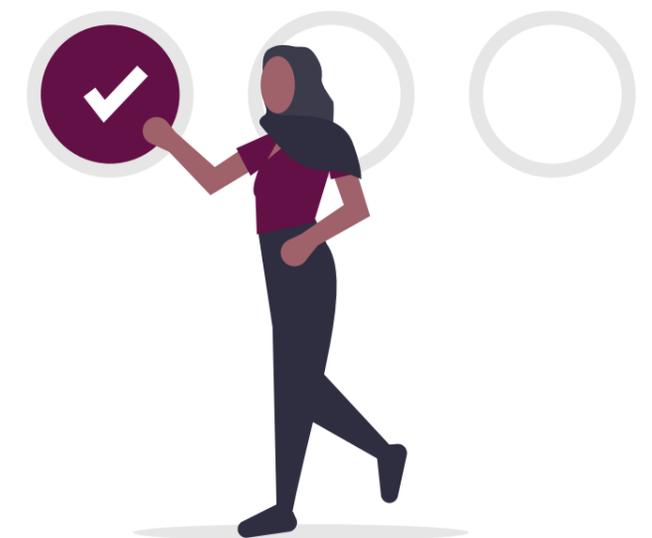
If you are working on verification that might expose you to graphic or distressing content, a strong network of other journalists who work in this space can be beneficial, says Alexandra. As a freelance journalist, you may not have access to in-house resources, newsroom meetings or well-being events, so "surround yourself with people" who understand this kind of work and join online groups and professional forums.

Access to tools

As a freelance journalist, access to paid-for tools and databases that can aid your verification work is likely to be limited or more restricted. If access to a tool or paid-for resource is crucial to your reporting, set this out in your pitch or negotiate access as part of your fee.

Seek out free alternative tools and establish cheaper processes. Wildon keeps data on external hard drives to avoid paying for cloud storage, for example. Ask if the publication you're working for has paid-for access to tools you might need.

If you're working with a newsroom, make sure they give you access to the tools they use – this is particularly easy to overlook if you are using your own computer or don't have a newsroom email address, says Alexandra.



Expert tip

Some basic programming can save you money, says Wildon: "You can learn ways to do some things yourself – with the added value that you never need to worry about a tool you get a lot of use out of becoming defunct. It's helpful to reassess what you pay for from time to time and see what you need and use enough to warrant paying for."

Do your homework and check up on a tool, an extension or a piece of software before you use it, adds Hill, who says the majority of tools he regularly uses are free: "It is worth noting that some are made outside of the limits a platform sets and so can become ineffective. Equally, some are offered by actors with an interest."





Useful links, databases and sourcebooks

10 Tips for reporting on disinformation - Data & Society	>
Advanced tool-kit - First Draft	>
Basic tool-kit - First Draft	>
BBC Africa Eye Forensics Dashboard - BBC Africa Eye team	>
Datajournalism.com	>
Fact Checking & Verification for Reporting - The Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism	>
Fact-checking tips and advice - Africa Check	>
First Draft	>
First Draft training - First Draft	>
Global Fact - checking sites - The Reporters' Lab, database of global	>

Fact-checking sites

Journalist's toolbox for fact-checking - Society of Professional Journalists	>
Junkipedia - Algorithmic Transparency Institute	>
Online Investigation Toolkit - Bellingcat	>
OSINT At Home video tutorials - Benjamin Strick	>
The International Fact-Checking Network - Poynter	>
The Life Cycle Method for Understanding Media Manipulation and Disinformation - Joan Donovan	>
The Media Manipulation Casebook - Joan Donovan	>
Verification and Digital Investigations Resources - Craig Silverman	>
Verification Handbook 1 - A Definitive Guide To Verifying Digital Content For Emergency Coverage - Datajournalism.com	>
Verification Handbook, For Disinformation And Media Manipulation - Datajournalism.com	>
Verifying Online Information - First Draft	>

Your checklist: Verify, verify, verify!

Start from the assumption that the content is inaccurate or has been scraped, sliced, diced, duplicated and/or reposted with different context. These steps are particularly recommended for verifying UGC (user generated content) but they are equally useful for fact-checking any type of information:

1. Identify and verify the original source and the content (including location, date and approximate time).
2. Triangulate and challenge the source.
3. Obtain permission from the author/originator to use the content.

Always gather information about the uploaders, and verify as much as possible before contacting and asking them directly whether they are creators of the content.

1. Identify and verify the original source and the content (including location, date and approximate time).

Provenance: The first step of verification is to identify the original content, be it a tweet, image, video, text message, etc. Some questions to start with:

- Can you find the same or similar posts/content elsewhere online?
- When was the first version of it uploaded/filmed/shared?
- Can you identify the location? Was the UGC geotagged?
- Are any websites linked from the content?
- Can you identify the person who shared/uploaded the UGC, and contact them for more information?

With the original content identified, gather information about the author/originator of the content. The goal is to confirm whether the person behind the account is a reliable source. Examine an uploader's digital footprint by asking these questions:

- Can you confirm the identity of, and contact, the person?
- Are you familiar with this account? Has their content and reportage been reliable in the past?
- Check the history of the uploader on the social network: How active are they on the account? What do they talk about/share? What biographical information is evident on the account? Does it link anywhere else? What kind of content have they previously uploaded? Where is the uploader based, judging by the account history?
- Check who they are connected on the social network: Who are their friends and followers? Who are they following? Who do they interact with? Are they on anyone else's lists?
- Try to find other accounts associated with the same name/username on other social networks in order to find more information:
 - If you find a real name, use people search tools
 - Check other social networks to find out about the person's professional background.
 - Check if a Twitter or Facebook Verified account is actually

verified by hovering over the blue check.

When dealing with images and videos, adopt the shooter's perspective. (These questions also work when trying to verify textual information.) Ask yourself these questions about the source to check their credibility:

- Who are they? Where are they? When did they get there? What could they see (and what does their photo/video show)? Where do they stand? Why are they there?
- Connect their activity to any other online accounts they maintain by asking these questions:
- Search Twitter or Facebook for the unique video code - are there affiliated accounts? Are there other accounts listed on the video profile or otherwise affiliated with this uploader? What information do affiliated accounts give that indicate recent location, activity, reliability, bias or agenda? How long have these accounts been active? How active are they? (The longer and more active, the more reliable they probably are.) Who are the social media accounts connected with, and what does this tell us about the up-loader? Can we find who is information for an affiliated website? Is the person listed in local phone directories, on Spokeo, Pipl.com or WebMii or on LinkedIn? Do their online social circles indicate they are close to this story/location?

Date: Verify the date and approximate time, particularly when dealing with photos/videos:

- Check the weather information on the day and the location where the event happened. Is the weather condition the same from the (local) weather forecasts and other uploads from the same event?
- Search news sources for reports about events on that day.
- Using video and image search see if any earlier pieces of content from the same event predate your example.
- For images and video, look (and listen) for any identifying elements that indicate date/time, such as clocks, television screens, newspaper pages, etc.

Location: Another crucial aspect of verification is to identify the location of the content:

- Does the content include automated geolocation information?
- Find reference points to compare with satellite imagery and geolocated photographs, such as:
 - Signs/lettering on buildings, street signs, car registration plates, billboards, etc.
 - Distinctive streetscape/landscape such as mountain range, line of trees, cliffs, rivers, etc.
 - Landmarks and buildings such as churches, minarets, stadiums, bridges, etc.
- Weather conditions such as sunlight or shadows to find approximate time of day. Use Wolfram Alpha to search weather reports at specific time and place.

- License/number plates on vehicles
- Clothing

For Videos:

- Examine the language(s) spoken in the video. Check if accents and dialects match up with the geographical location. Beware that Google Translate does not give correct translation for some languages. Ask those who speak the language for support.
- Are video descriptions consistent and mostly from a specific location?
- Are videos dated?
- If videos on the account use a logo, is this logo consistent across the videos? Does it match the avatar on the YouTube or Vimeo account?
- Does the uploader "scrape" videos from news organizations and other YouTube accounts, or do they upload solely user-generated content?
- Does the uploader write in slang or dialect that is identifiable in the video's narration?
- Are the videos on this account of a consistent quality?
- Do video descriptions have file extensions such as .AVI or .MP4 in the video title? This can indicate the video was uploaded directly from a device.
- Does the description of a YouTube video read: "Uploaded via YouTube Capture"? This may indicate the video was filmed on a smartphone.

2. Triangulate and challenge the source

Once you go through the above steps ask yourself:

- Do the images/videos/content make sense given the context in which it was shot/filmed?
- Does anything look out of place?
- Do any of the source's details or answers to my questions not add up?
- Did media outlets or organizations distribute similar images/videos?
- Is there anything on Snopes related to this?
- Does anything feel off, or too good to be true?

When getting in touch with the source, ask direct questions and cross-reference answers to information you get through your own research. Make sure that their answers match up with your findings.

Source: **Verification Handbook 1, Datajournalism.com** →